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## Colloquium Brief: Learning By Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad

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Key Insights:

- Recent People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy exercises and operations, such as the Gulf of Aden (GOA) anti-piracy deployment, point to an increasing interest in developing a presence in distant seas and expeditionary naval capabilities.
- The PLA's ground force exercises, rather than aiming to intimidate others by demonstrating the ability to project power beyond China's borders, are most relevant to operations within mainland China; transmilitary region exercises contribute to China's deterrence posture by demonstrating a proven ability to project power to repel an attack while People's Armed Police (PAP) exercises and operations reveal increased capabilities to counter terrorism and control civil unrest.
- Through its participation in international military exercises, as well as peacekeeping operations (PKO) and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions abroad, the PLA is gaining greater capabilities to deploy outside China's borders for a variety of missions.
- PLA operations are increasingly supported by a modern, civilian-integrated military logistics network; however, a lack of overseas bases continues to limit the effectiveness of this network as it pertains to overseas power projection capabilities—especially in less than accommodating external environments.

## Introduction.

Leading experts on the Chinese military gathered at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia, on February 18, 2012, for a workshop titled “Learning By Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad.” The 2011-12 PLA Workshop was convened by The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) of the U.S. Army War College (USAWC), the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM), and the Marine Corps University (MCU).

For over 20 years, leading scholars and experts on the Chinese military have gathered at the annual People's Liberation Army (PLA) Conference to discuss important trends in the modernization of China's military. The series of annual volumes that results from these conferences has become an authoritative benchmark on the pace, scope, and scale of China's

military modernization. In an effort to better understand the PLA's ability to employ its developing capabilities in a variety of potential scenarios, this year's workshop examined how the PLA learns by doing, specifically through its exercises and noncombat operations at home and overseas, and through key logistics and theoretical developments.

In many ways, this year's workshop was the second installment of an examination of how the PLA has sought to gain experience in the practice of modern warfare despite lacking any recent combat experience. Though some Chinese sources assert that the PLA Navy's (PLAN) current GOA anti-piracy mission involves "combat-like" conditions, most PLA observers cite the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese clash as the last instance of Chinese military involvement in a major armed conflict with a foreign foe. Thus, the 2010 conference first examined what the PLA has learned from its observation of other nations' wars. To review all 2010 conference papers, the complete volume titled *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples' Wars* (edited by Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen; Strategic Studies Institute, 2011) can be downloaded from NBR and SSI websites.

This year's workshop sought to analyze another main source of the PLA's learning through operations other than war, namely its exercises and noncombat operations. Thus, the workshop aimed to fill a void within the literature on the PLA by assessing what progress it has made from recent exercises and noncombat operations related to the following areas: PLA Navy exercises and operations; PLA domestic ground force exercises; multinational exercises in international settings; and systems and strategy reform. Regarding this last category, the eighth and final paper presented at the workshop took a stance on a strongly debated issue, arguing that a unique "Chinese way of war" does indeed exist.

Conference organizers asked authors to analyze each of these areas of study by answering the following questions:

- What key PLA capabilities have been enhanced as a result of recent exercises and noncombat operations?
- What lessons in military doctrine, strategy, and training were learned?
- Are there observable adjustments that the PLA has made in response to these lessons learned?
- What are the implications of these developments for the United States?

# PLAN Exercises and Operations.

In many ways, the PLAN has been the most visible branch of the Chinese military on the global stage through its port calls, exercises with international partners, and participation in overseas operations such as the GOA anti-piracy mission. Of these international engagements, the anti-piracy deployment in particular has led to important lessons learned for the PLAN. For one, the importance of logistics during extended deployments was reinforced. Due to China's long-held stance on not establishing overseas military bases, the PLAN relies on commercial ports and agreements for its replenishment, such as in Salalah, Oman. Additionally, the GOA mission has led to the improvement of the PLAN's emergency medical evacuation and major engineering repair capabilities due to specific events which have occurred during the deployments. More generally, these ongoing deployments have contributed to the PLAN's ability to maintain itself at sea for longer periods of time, develop realistic exercises based on the operation at hand, and have given it the opportunity to interact with other major navies of the world. In short, these operations have contributed to the PLAN's better learning of how to operate in distant seas, an area of ever-expanding importance, due to China's increased interests and presence overseas. These operations will continue to carry the PLAN beyond "offshore defense" and into a more global, expeditionary navy.

As for the more unilateral, domestic side of the PLAN's development, the complexity, length, and multi-unit participation of Chinese naval exercises have been continuously increasing. These exercises are part of the PLAN's developing training regime, which must balance the competing requirements to both indoctrinate sailors ideologically and assure their loyalty to the Party while also being devoted to ensuring their ability to work in a high technology and modern warfare environment. Despite its struggle to perfect this balance, the PLAN's training continues to develop in terms of joint training, military operations other than war (MOOTW), civilian integration in military operations, training according to doctrine, and training under "real-war" conditions. This training has led to improvements in professionalism and the PLAN's ability to perform in all the standard areas of naval warfare. Furthermore, regional naval exercises are increasingly being employed to send political signals to the United States and others in the Asia Pacific through an increased PLAN presence in the region. This trend will persist in the near future as the PLAN continues to develop its training and exercise regimen.

## Domestic Ground Force Exercises.

Transmilitary region (MR) exercises, which mostly feature PLA ground forces, have important implications for the PLA's overall development and modernization, as well as its power projection capabilities. These exercises have been growing in size and complexity in recent years and are aimed at improving the PLA's ability to send forces to border regions to repel attacks on China. Within this framework, the Jinan MR is particularly relevant given its geographic positioning and role as a strategic reserve, and it has played a central role in many of the trans-MR exercises. The reliance on civilian support and transportation by rail in these exercises further emphasizes their domestic, mainland focus. In fact, the potential exists for these exercises to prove that out-of-region forces supported by reserves and civilians can sufficiently reinforce border areas during a conflict. This development could justify cuts in main force ground units that could, in turn, free up resources for a range of potential other uses, including, perhaps, transportation assets that could contribute to the PLA's long-distance power projection capabilities. In addition, these exercises have allowed the PLA to experiment with operational techniques in areas in which it lags behind other advanced militaries, such as command and control and joint operations. Thus, trans-MR exercises not only contribute to PLA capabilities, but also to China's overall deterrence posture, and are important signifiers of overall PLA development and modernization.

Another element of China's ground forces development through exercises involves the PAP, a force that, in contrast to the PLA, often deploys to conduct its primary mission, namely responding to domestic crises and ensuring domestic security. Given this situation, even more so than for other elements of China's armed forces, the PAP is forced to balance the need to always be prepared to immediately fulfill its role as a ready response force with the need to develop its capabilities through training and exercises. Recently, in part due to lessons learned from inadequacies shown in past deployments, the PAP has stepped up its training on counterterrorism and riot control, border control, and natural disaster response operations. A series of events that occurred between 2008 and 2010, including the Beijing Olympics and the major earthquake in Sichuan province, combined with force modernization efforts have led to the PAP now being at a historically high state of readiness. Going forward, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will place great emphasis on the PAP's ability to respond quickly and effectively to conduct anti-terror and riot control missions, while coordinating its role with that of the PLA and other elements of China's forces. During wartime, the PAP's importance will lie in supporting the PLA in a variety of areas at the national level, while providing local crowd control in the face of domestic civil unrest that may accompany external crises, an area of great concern for China's leadership.

## Multinational Exercises in International Settings.

As for the PLA's recent international exercises, the 2010 iteration of Peace Mission, organized under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), aimed to test the interoperability of SCO forces as they simulated providing assistance to a member state facing an attack. Peace Mission 2010 involved a 2-week phased exercise in Kazakhstan in which a simulated terrorist attack was repelled by a force made up of SCO member states including China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Participating PLA forces included approximately 1,000 troops, mostly from the Beijing MR, and were divided into army, air force, and logistics groups accompanied by heavy equipment and vehicles, such as tanks, helicopters, and fighter jets. Despite this opportunity for the PLA to train with international partners on coordinated air strikes, joint operations, rapid assaults, and nonlinear operations, the exercise's scripted nature, lack of realism, and lack of coordination among the forces of the various nations detracted from the value of potential lessons learned by the PLA. Still, the PLA did draw important lessons regarding transporting troops and equipment over long distances and international borders, and for the PLA Air Force's (PLAAF) ability to conduct long-range air strikes outside China's borders. These lessons reinforce and contribute to the growing notion of the PLA as a more expeditionary force that is willing and confident in dispatching its assets overseas, as the PLAAF did during the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya.

Additionally, the continued development and expansion of the scope of the PLA's mission, especially an increased emphasis on MOOTW, has led to increased participation in PKOs and HADR operations abroad. In order to improve its MOOTW capabilities, seen as important in ensuring stable domestic and international environments for China's continued development, the PLA has been improving its training methodology, its operational command system, and its integrated support capabilities. While PLA contributions to international PKO and HADR missions to date have consisted of noncombat roles for Chinese troops in areas such as logistics, engineering, and transportation, they have provided a number of benefits for China and the PLA. These may include contributing to an effort to reduce external suspicion and mistrust of the PLA's rapid development and China's intentions, improving the PLA's ability to deal with domestic emergencies, and increasing the professionalism and capabilities of PLA troops through real operations and interactions with foreign militaries. The PLA's continued participation in these areas provides the United States and its allies the opportunity to engage the PLA, institutionalize these engagements, continue to integrate China in the international system, and emphasize the importance of reciprocity and transparency.

# Systems and Strategy Reform.

As the demands placed on the PLA have increased in terms of the diversity and geographic scope of its missions, PLA logistics have been forced to keep up in order to support these missions. The improvement and modernization of PLA logistics has included introducing complex information systems, incorporating market forces, improving civil-military and inter-service logistical integration, enhancing readiness for diverse military roles, and ensuring logistical support for operations on land, sea, air, space, and the electronic domain. In particular, the integration of civilian capabilities as well as the modernization of the logistics system has led to marked improvements in PLA logistics, which are now able to support more extended, mobile, long-distance deployments both at home and abroad. However, these still-limited capabilities depend on a relatively pacific external environment, given the PLA's still-maturing power projection capabilities and its lack of external basing. The acquisition of aerial refuelers and replenishment ships, as well as the institution of conceptual frameworks, such as “system of systems” and “multidimensional” capabilities, may mitigate the problem, but will not solve it, since PLA assets remain quite vulnerable beyond China's defended territory. Going forward, if it wishes to continue to establish an expanded range of power projection and mission capabilities, the PLA will need to somehow overcome its lack of overseas bases.

In terms of China's strategic thinking, one workshop presenter argued that despite the PLA's internalization of U.S. military concepts, such as integrated joint operations (IJO), the PLA will continue to adhere to its own unique views on the nature of war, justification for the use of force, and how to conduct war. According to this line of thinking, the “Chinese way of war” is made up of classical Chinese military and political thought, traditional Chinese strategic culture, and Mao Zedong's military principles. Additionally, China abides by the Confucian view that war is a means to restore order both externally and internally, which is especially relevant in terms of China's justification for reclaiming disputed territories in terms of “recovering” what has been taken from it. In deciding when to employ force, the Chinese have developed the concept of “post-emption,” meaning that China will not initiate wars but may employ preemptive strikes once a certain threshold has been crossed. Finally, China still references Sun Zi's call to “subjugate the enemy without fighting” through the use of strategy, stratagems, and deception. The presenter thus asserted that the introduction of modern concepts and equipment to the PLA has only amplified the tenets of the “Chinese way of war,” while calling into question the applicability of past concepts

such as “people's war”; and while China has, in fact, learned from the militaries of the United States and other Western countries at the operational level, the maintenance of its traditional strategic thinking assures a continued divergence in principles and interests between the two sides.

## Conclusion.

The 2011-12 PLA Workshop set out to examine what lessons the PLA has been learning from its domestic and international exercises as well as its noncombat operations. The increasingly expeditionary nature of the PLA was a recurring theme present among the conclusions by workshop presenters in their analyses. Whether it be through the PLAN's participation in the overseas anti-piracy mission, the PLA and PLAAF's participation in multinational exercises abroad, PLA participation in MOOTW operations, the development of PLA logistics, or even PLA ground forces' transregional domestic exercises, all of these operations and exercises have significant implications for the PLA's ability and willingness to project its power and increase its presence beyond China's defended territory. As these efforts appear likely to transition into more “combat-like” operations in the future, given China's expanding interests and presence, outside observers must continue to analyze the PLA's ability to translate its lessons from these simulations and noncombat situations into effectiveness in actual deployments, especially in terms of how it may overcome its lack of overseas bases when projecting power abroad.

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